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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS ON QATAR TRIP, ZAKAT
COMMITTEES, MOSQUES

REF: JERUSALEM 1284

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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¶1. (S) Summary: PA Minister of Religious Affairs Mahmud al-Habash called Qatar's recent decision to re-open the Qatari Charitable Society (QCS) in the West Bank under PA supervision a positive step. He said the memorandum of understanding (MOU) he signed with QCS gives the PA information on the source and destination of donations, which will go to PA-controlled zakat committees. At the same time, the absence of any mention of Gaza in the MOU suggests that QCS may continue to work with Hamas-controlled zakat committees in Gaza, as press reports indicate has been the case for some time. Habash also described the PA's ongoing efforts to reform West Bank zakat committees and its campaign against incitement in mosques. He noted that the ministry would soon launch a radio station to give religious Palestinians a vehicle to voice non-extremist views. End summary.

Qatar Engages the PA (Slightly)

¶2. (C) In a September 15 meeting with ConGenOffs, Minister Habash provided a readout of his recent trip to Qatar to follow up on PA President Abu Mazen's early September meetings in Doha. Habash said the MOU he signed with QCS signaled a positive change in Qatar's approach toward the PA, noting QCS is the largest Qatari charitable contributor to the Palestinian territories. The September 9 MOU allows the PA to oversee the appointment of QCS's West Bank representatives and direct assistance from the organization to PA-controlled zakat committees. The MOU also obliges QCS to inform the PA of the source and recipient of funds. In return, QCS offices will reopen in Ramallah, and the PA will return the USD 1 million that it froze in early 2008 on the suspicion that the organization was working with Hamas.

¶3. (S) Habash claimed the MOU covers both the West Bank and Gaza, although the text he gave us specifically focuses on PA-controlled zakat committees, with no reference to Gaza. (Comment: The MOU, therefore, may not prevent QCS from also supporting Hamas-controlled zakat committees in Gaza. End Comment.)

Zakat Reforms Aim to Legitimize PA, Discredit Hamas

¶4. (C) Habash stressed that he wants Palestinians to associate Hamas solely with failed governance in Gaza. The PA must "erase from people's minds that Hamas can help them," he said, noting that he wanted to show that Hamas is weaker

and less effective than the PA, undercutting Hamas' support in the West Bank. The way to do this, Habash said, is by reviving the West Bank's eleven zakat committees and using them to deliver services from the PA, including education, health care, food, and monetary assistance. As examples of what he hoped to achieve, Habash cited the Hebron zakat committee's success in feeding 3,000 families a day during Ramadan and recent disbursement of USD 50-60 to thousands of Gazan families "directly from Abu Mazen."

15. (C) Habash commented that the PA needs to build on this model. While the PA's recent reforms of the zakat committees (reftel) have increased control over the committees and distanced them from Hamas, he said Hamas is still able to exert some influence through unaffiliated members of the committees. Habash cited Qatari zakat committees as the most well-organized and supervised in the Arab world, noting that Qatar had offered to help share its expertise with the PA. He said most of the PA zakat committees' funding traditionally originated in Qatar and Kuwait but that, in recent months, the PA had seen an increase in donations from local Palestinians as well. He attributed this to Palestinians' increasing confidence in the committees and the actual beneficiaries of the donations. After the Eid al-Fitr holiday, Habash said his Ministry would hold workshops with the zakat committees to evaluate the progress of the reforms. Habash estimated that each of the committees needed between USD 3 million and USD 7 million annually to deliver the necessary services.

New Funding for Positions in Mosques

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16. (SBU) Habash reviewed progress in the PA's campaign against incitement in mosques, noting that the first stage of the PA's plan (unifying weekly mosque sermons based on PA-provided talking points) is complete. The PA has begun to implement a "second stage" of the campaign, which involves replacing a small minority of problematic imams. Additionally, he said PM Fayyad recently agreed to fund 400 additional full-time and 1,450 part-time positions to replace and augment staff at the mosques. Habash added that the Ministry of Religious Affairs also plans to launch a new radio station after Ramadan to provide a religious alternative to existing, extremist rhetoric on the airwaves.
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